



CREATING A *welcoming and accessible* WORKPLACE

By Nancy Boyle | EAP Trainer
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As companies and organizations continue to navigate through their diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts, understanding the needs of employees with varying disabilities is going to be key in creating a welcoming and accessible workplace.

Let's begin by defining **inclusion** and **disability inclusion**.

- The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines **inclusion** separately from diversity as “the achievement of a work environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization’s success.”¹

- **Disability inclusion** means understanding the relationship between the way people function and how they participate in society and making sure everybody has the same opportunities to participate in every aspect of life to the best of their abilities and desires.²

Many times, as a supervisor you may not be aware of an employee’s disability, especially if it is a **psychiatric disability**, a mental health condition covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.³ These include an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, depression, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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Do employees have to inform their employer about their disability? In most cases, disclosing a psychiatric disability is a choice, not a requirement. Individuals who choose not to talk about their mental health condition are not “lying” or “hiding.” They are using a legally protected choice.

Applicants and employees with psychiatric disabilities have two main rights under the ADA.

1. **They have a right to privacy.** Except when asking for an accommodation, they can choose whether to tell the employer about their disability.
2. **They have a right to job accommodation** unless this causes undue hardship for the employer. An undue hardship is an action that requires significant difficulty or expense in relation to the size of the employer, resources available, and the nature of the operation.

TYPES OF ACCOMMODATIONS

Reasonable accommodations⁴ can take many forms, including:

- **Physical changes to the workplace**, such as raising or lowering work surfaces, installing ramps, providing better lighting or sound proofing, or making ergonomic changes to workstations.
- **Changes to work schedules**, such as allowing an employee to come in later, leave earlier, work part-time, or take time off.
- **Modifications to job duties**, such as reassigning marginal tasks to other employees, or
- **Changes to workplace policies**, such as allowing an employee who uses a wheelchair to wear a modified uniform or allowing an employee with diabetes to take more frequent breaks.

ATTITUDINAL AWARENESS

Employees may have misconceptions about people with disabilities and the work they can do. EARN (Employee Assistance and Resource Network) on Disability Inclusion defines and provides these examples of attitudinal barriers⁵:

- **Inferiority:** The employee is seen as a “second-class citizen.”
- **Pity:** People feel sorry for the employee and are patronizing as a result.
- **Hero worship:** People consider a person with a disability living independently to be “special.”
- **Ignorance:** The employee is dismissed as incapable because of his or her disability.
- **Multi-sensory affect:** People assume that the employee’s disability affects his or her other senses.
- **Stereotypes:** People make both positive and negative generalizations about disabilities.
- **Backlash:** People believe the employee is being given an unfair advantage because of his or her disability.
- **Denial:** People may not believe that hidden disabilities are legitimate and therefore do not require accommodations.
- **Fear:** People are afraid they will offend an employee with a disability by doing or saying the wrong thing and, as a result, will avoid the employee.



DID YOU KNOW?

Disability affects approximately 61 MILLION Americans, or about 1 in 4 people in the United States living in communities.

Employees with mobility, hearing or sight impairments may be viewed or perceived differently than those who may have a psychiatric disability. In addition to attitudinal awareness, it’s important to create a culture where it is OK to talk about mental health and mental health issues.

Address concerns with your colleagues, let them know you care, and encourage your staff to utilize their Employee Assistance Program benefits. Share the toll-free number to access Village EAP services (1-800-627-8220) and encourage them to visit www.VillageEAP.com (case-sensitive password: VillageEAP). You do not have to go through it alone, reach out and talk to someone!

References

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4. <https://askjan.org/a-to-z.cfm>
5. <https://askearn.org/topics/creating-an-accessible-and-welcoming-workplace/attitudinal-awareness/>



NANCY BOYLE joined The Village Business Institute in February 2018 as an Employee Assistance Program Trainer. She is passionate about connecting and equipping businesses and individuals to reach their full potential.

Nancy has a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration and Human Resource Management with an emphasis in the Human Services from Valley City State University, and brings 15 years of public speaking and facilitation experience to The Village with a background in program management, training coordination, and volunteer management.

Her certifications include: MN Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Credentialed Advocate (Advanced Level) with designation of Comprehensive Victim Intervention Specialist; Volunteer Impact Leadership – MN Association of Volunteer Administrators; and Technology of Participation Facilitation Methods – The Institute of Cultural Affairs.

5 ways TO CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

BY ALEX BELSEY

An inclusive workplace is better for everyone – not just those with disabilities.

The more diverse your workforce, the broader the range of talent, insights, and innovation that you are inviting into your company. A diverse workforce is also much more likely to understand and cater to a varied customer base, ensuring that your company reaches the widest audience possible.

Supporting those with disabilities and different needs in the workplace is also an ongoing effort – it is not simply about “ticking boxes” or meeting requirements. A genuinely inclusive workplace should have support, adaptability, and communication built into its very core.

Current studies show that nearly one in five people has a disability. This may be an invisible disability, like a long-term health condition, mental health issue, or disorder such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. It could also be a more obvious impairment, like hearing loss, sight loss, or a physical disability, for example.

Disabilities are as varied as people, and it is important for employees and employers to feel they can have supportive conversations around these topics. Beyond the federal and state requirements that compel employers to ensure employees with a disability are able to work effectively, there is so much more that can be done.

In this article, you'll learn five key ways you can help to create a more inclusive workplace in your own business.



1. Adapt the Environment

You can support those with disabilities in the workplace by adapting the working environment physically. First discuss with employees any individual needs they may have and what would best support them in their work.

Changes can be as simple as removing physical barriers and obstacles, rearranging certain areas, or adjusting desk and seating arrangements. Alternatively, more in-depth alterations might be required, such as specialty working equipment or computer software.

Not all modifications need to be costly or substantial, and even small changes can have a big impact.

2. Make Information Accessible

Many people with disabilities in the workplace have found that information can be shared in a way which is not always accessible to them. For employees with sight loss, for example, emails or bulletin boards may not be the best way to receive crucial information.

Consult with colleagues and employees about what is the best way to communicate information with them, and whether they require the details presented in a different format.

Sharing information consistently and in a variety of accessible forms is not only vital for ensuring everyone feels included, it is also key for high productivity and good overall communication in the workplace.



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3. Perform Regular Reviews and Foster Dialogue

Maintaining an inclusive workplace is often an ongoing project – constantly adapting and changing the space to support the needs of new personnel. Part of facilitating this is creating an open dialogue, where everyone has the opportunity to voice their concerns, questions, or feedback about what is working well – and what needs improvement.

It can be helpful to schedule regular reviews or workshops to assess whether the workplace is as accessible and inclusive as it could be, and what the best ways to support people going forward are.

Employees should be encouraged to feel confident in approaching their employer with suggestions or concerns. Happy employees who feel heard and supported are more likely to be loyal, productive, and creative in the workplace.

4. Train Your Staff and Build Awareness

A greater understanding of mental health in the workplace has been a crucial development in recent years, leading to millions of employees receiving far greater support.

Of course, having professionals on your team who are trained in mental health first aid is especially helpful, but so is fostering an overall culture of sensitivity and awareness around disabilities in the workplace. This can be encouraged through additional courses, training, or educational workshops, and promotion of your employee assistance program.

Sensitivity, positivity, and high levels of awareness are all important to nurturing an inclusive workplace – especially for understanding areas such as invisible disabilities or mental health issues.

5. Offer Flexible Working Options

Everyone can benefit from more flexible working options, but for those with disabilities this can be especially crucial.

Flexible working options might include working from home on certain days, staggered start or finish times, as well as phased return to work options – such as after an accident or a medical procedure.

Studies have shown that flexible working options do not have to be erratic or disruptive in any way. On the contrary, they have often led to more productive, satisfied workforces, and stronger results over time due to improved energy levels, a better work-life balance, and higher job satisfaction.

Offering a more inclusive and accessible workplace will also benefit you in terms of the caliber of candidates you will attract to job roles, and in the quality of work they will produce.

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